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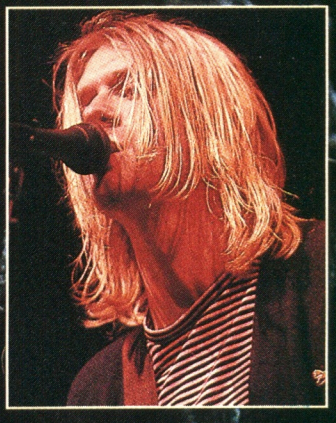

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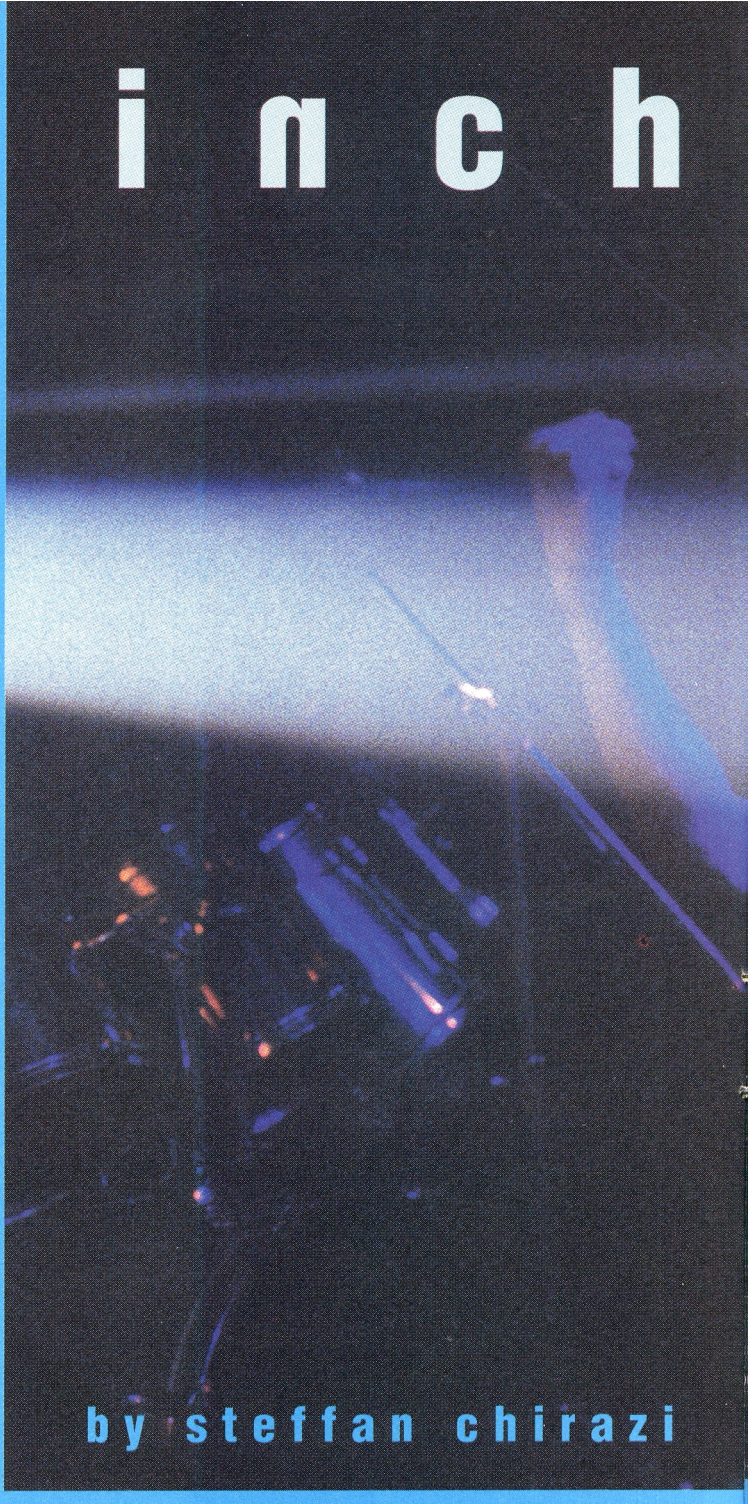

TRENT REZNOR

by steffan chirazi

Vulnerable, pale and looking like a wounded animal about to strike back at it's aggressors, Trent Reznor, the man who is Nine Inch Nails, stares out at us from magazine covers the world over. *The Downward Spiral*, NIN's second full-length album, is guaranteed a wider, hungrier and more fanatical audience plugging into it's soundscape of emotional torture. The anthemic "Head Like A Hole," Lollapalooza '91, and the support of Guns N' Roses insured that Reznor carry with him the anguish of millions, all relating to his brutally cathartic, raw lyrics, all moving to his emotionally-charge, guitar-revved, electro-shock therapy. It is the human voices in those machines, both recorded and more immediately live, that have insured Trent Reznor's rise to prominence. Yet still we need to believe there's more.

We want Trent Reznor, to be some bucked-up little psychopath, wandering around with pent-up aggressions coursing through his veins, one step away from exploding into rapid gunfire at some suburban shopping mall. We'd love Trent Reznor to be our own premier pariah, an intellectually superior devil of doom. We'd love Trent Reznor to have some f?!ked up little head-trip, some f?!ked-up views, a f?!ked-up past and a f?!ked-up life. We'd love to hear that Trent Reznor is some weird, violent sadist who likes to f?!k in bondage and enjoys the pain. We'd love Trent Reznor to be something more than flesh and blood. Some steel and rubber and leather perhaps? Surely a man so passionately vitriolic and aggressive, so extraordinarily creative, so dialed-in yet so '90s cold and clinical must be a biomechanoid not of this earth.

"If you look at two of the most talented filmmakers around right now, David Cronenberg and David Lynch, they had relatively normal upbringings. It doesn't always take exotic, bizarre lifestyles, early-age molestations and prison sentences."
— Trent Reznor, 1994

Reality. Trent Reznor is a slim, sharp, dedicated and diminutive man who is riding the same train we all are. The previous night, at one of four secret shows set up to try out gear for the forthcoming world tour, Reznor led an aural assault that was absurdly powerful, enjoying the charge of volume and triple-guitar aggression enough to leave himself sitting in front of me sporting a few bruises and a scrape on his nose, and his voice in need of some throat-coat tea as it adapts to road work. Trent Reznor is actually far more mentality healthy and stable than either we want him to be...or we are, for that matter. He has found catharsis in performance, and as a result, has had the freedom to become a unique artist, taking music, sounds and emotions to a whole new arena. And if one thing is deafeningly loud in it's silence as you sit and talk with him, it is that Trent Reznor has a single-minded tunnel-visioned desire to achieve whatever it is he wants. He leaves you with no doubt that those who stand in his way will not be around him for too long.

RIP: Is the work about just you or the human condition?
TRENT REZNOR: It's *from* me. I try to not get too over-specific so as it could apply to more than maybe just what I'm talking about, but I don't think about 'speaking from the every man' perspective. It's very cathartic.
RIP: When was the first time you realized you had a range of emotions that needed expressing?
TR: It was through music. I was a trained pianist and I'd get into trouble because the way I played pieces was not the strict way you were meant to play them. I'd add inflections to it, play around with it, and you weren't meant to do that. I had been forced to learn piano by my parents and ended up liking it a lot, I realized that it was a really expressive instrument. There came that moment when I realized I could express how I felt through a musical instrument, I was around 12 or 13 when it struck me.
RIP: Were you brought up with any religious oppression?
TR: No not at all, my parents [Reznor spent a good portion of his childhood being

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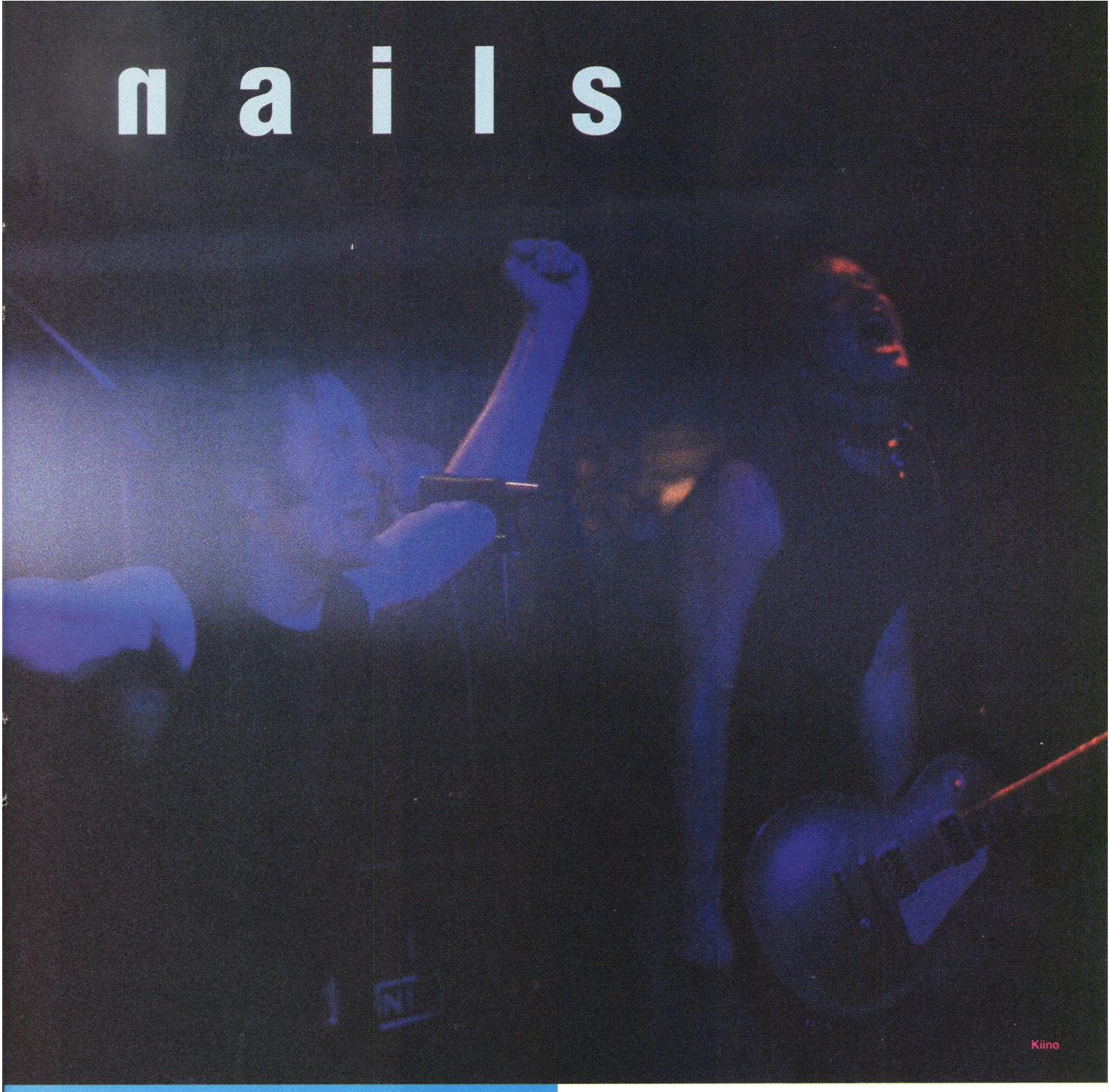

Kiino

Mr. Self-Destruct?

raised by grandparents] weren't very religious although I was bought up a Protestant. I guess my focus on that [religion] comes from the fact I believe it's just one more belief system that's failed, that doesn't hold up to any scrutiny. I enjoy stories, fantasy stories, mythology, ghost stories and I wanna believe in that shit. But for me the religious system I was brought up in doesn't hold up to scrutiny any better than the ghost stories you would tell around the campfire.

RIP: What situation(s) made you want to search for more answers than were just being fed to you as growing teenager? Was it 'the nerdy kid' syndrome?

TR: There was no specific incident [other] than I always had a curious nature and wanted to do things. Where I grew up was a very rural environment and there wasn't much going on. I wasn't really a nerdy kid as much as I was the kid who was always in the Art Study school, listening to music and hangin' out. I was in the band but I wasn't accepted by them because some of my friends were jocks and they wouldn't accept me because I wasn't on the f?!kin' football team. I kinda fell through the cracks. I was a bit of a loner and I hated school. I have no friends from that era even now. I think in a place where there's nothing for kids to do than cause trouble and vandalize, it gives you more time sitting on your hands figuring out what you wanted to do, finding a way of escape. Although I don't regret being brought up in that situation, it probably saved me from being a heroin addict or killing myself at an early age because that stuff wasn't around. I mean growing up was like being in camp for 18 years: You hear there's a world out there, you hear there's a place where things happen but you can't get there because you don't know where it is.

RIP: Were there any particular pieces of art–either music, movies, books whatev-

Joseph Cultice

er–that influenced you to veer off into the left-field from an early age?

TR: I can't say at that early age exactly where my head was at. I can't cite any particular references and influences that stuck out, I just tend to go through little revelations where I find myself by habit locking into a certain way of doing things. Maybe it's hearing a record or seeing a film or reading a book and it triggers something in me that let's me realize I can try something. That happened a few times on *The Downward Spiral*, it happened a huge time around *Pretty Hate Machine* and *Broken*.

RIP: Many kids in many lifetimes have harbored the same aspirations as you did. What pushed you to make them reality and not just teenage fantasy?

TR: I orchestrated my whole life to doing this. At some point I decided, to use the cliche, you only live once. I didn't allow myself to get bogged down into burdensome relationships, jobs I couldn't leave, friends I couldn't leave. And at one point I had this asinine thing where I was saying, 'if I make it, it just goes to show anyone can make it in the entertainment field, your father doesn't have to be the president of the fu?!ing record company.' I'm not out to prove that anymore. But like a lot of things in my life, I was told 'you can't do that ' and it pushed me the other way. You've gotta understand the climate, my family wanted the best for me and I didn't wanna go to school and was gonna be a f?!king rock musician! Odds are you're gonna be playing the local bar down the street until you're 45 years old. I remember really believing in it, hoping that I had some ability.

RIP: You are what I would call a deconstructionalist, in that you seem to enjoy ripping things down and re-assembling them to suit a variety of moods and emotions. What would possess a young man to explore such musically expressive avenues as opposed to just strapping on a Les Paul and playing bar songs?

TR: When I first picked up a guitar I *did* just play rock songs. I had an idea of what I wanted to do, and I always felt I was 'outside' everything. So the idea of tearing down what was the inside was appealing. I didn't recognize that consciously but everything I did was to attack what I wasn't a part of, and what I probably resented not being a part of. When I finally got up off my ass and quit wasting time, at 22, 23 years old, I had to call my own bluff to see if I really had it in me. I'd never written a song before and had every excuse in the world not to. I was afraid it would suck and then what would I do? That was kinda ingrained in me from learning piano, where most of the great pianists are shitty composers. Great piano players but they can't write to save their ass, and when they do it's an embarrassing fumble into pretentiousness. And that kind of fear was always inside me, I knew what I did and didn't like, but what if I didn't like what I wrote? Finally I realized it was time to try. I sat back and thought about why I wanted to make music, and it was to express myself. Then there was the question of what I had to say, was it unique? I've no interest in sounding like anyone else, which isn't to say every idea I have is original, because it isn't.

RIP: Was simple hard rock too restrictive a genre for you to express everything you wanted to? Is that what pushed you into using computers, sampling and synthesizers?

TR: I didn't think that, per se. My instruments are computers, samplers, drum machines and technology. Live it's certainly more fun to see someone playing a guitar and it's more fun to express yourself live with one rather than tapping a computer or a sequencer. But when I started Nine Inch Nails at the age of 23, working in a studio, I had the nights to f?!k around with. I was really into electronic music at the time and there was effort going into the production and sound of that music. There was music being made that couldn't have happened ten years prior because it was based on then-new technology, although now it could sound a bit dated...

RIP: Like Gary Numan (an early '80's British electro-musician)?

TR: Actually, I listen to Gary Numan a lot and I think that stuff sounds great still.

RIP: Well, if you like Numan, you must have found strength in the Bowie-Berlin era which gave birth to Numan, the *Low/Heroes/Lodger* trilogy.

TR: Yeah, especially with this record, and I only discovered that stuff a couple of years ago. *Low* was probably the single greatest influence on *The Downward Spiral* for me and Flood [the co-producer most famous for his U2 work]. I got into Bowie in the *Scary Monsters...* era, which I thought was a f?!king amazing album. For some reason I wasn't motivated to go backwards but I went forwards with him and tried to make through the next few but didn't get very far. I stumbled across the *Hunky Dory* LP and I couldn't believe how good every song was, it made me wonder what was going on back in '72/'73. I felt it must've been insane. Then I picked up *Low*, listened to it, and instantly fell for it. I related to it on a songwriting level, a mood level and on a song-structure level. That then got me into the Iggy Pop record *The Idiot*, which was an amazing album, and Lou Reed's *Transformer* era.

RIP: Aside from that important Bowie influence, there is also the age-old question of recording in the house where Sharon Tate (the wife of renowned movie director Roman Polanski) was murdered by the Manson gang in one of the most senseless acts of violence ever perpetrated. Was that, along with the decision to situate in Los Angeles for the record, a further exercise in immersing yourself with misery, violence and sadness? The vibes in that main room must've been horrific during recording.

TR: The Tate house was just a house that we then *discovered* was the Tate House, they didn't advertise that fact when we were looking at it. The reason I was there is because it was a cool, nice house on this beautiful green mountainside that overlooks the whole city from the ocean to the downtown. It's really quiet and secluded, yet it's also five minutes from the Whisky [the famous Sunset Strip club]. After I was aware of what had happened there, when I was already in the house myself, it was pretty freaky. You freaked yourself out, you'd just found out it was 'the house' and now you lived there. After about a month of 'every sound...' you got used to it. If there was any sort of vibe there it was one of quiet, maybe sadness. But the nice thing about that house, which I feel had nothing to do with what happened there, was I wouldn't leave for weeks. The house was on it's own, gated in, and once I realized I hated L.A. there was never any reason to leave. Food was delivered, I'd hang out with my dog and Chris [Vrenna, long-time Reznor aide and drummer]. That perhaps added to the isolation and claustrophobia of the record.

RIP: It seems that you enjoy getting out those ugly feelings in your work, yet one day it may become a curse that you always have to enter such a dark mental space to make this music.

TR: I've thought about that, and it was an unpleasant experience for this one because I did really have to dig down in there. I came up with the analogy that it was like climbing down a manhole and pulling the cover over my head. I think one thing that led to the delay of this record was the denial stage, not wanting to do that.

RIP: When did that hit?

TR: Well, when we started I was in L.A. and hadn't toured for a long-time. If I could go back I would've toured just a short tour after *Broken* just to balance myself out a bit. When I am in the studio I'm in there all the time, easily a minimum 14 hours every day. And I realized as I started that I was going to have to dig deep yet again [as he did with *Broken* which was the release of his TVT Records angst]. Will it always be that way? I don't know, right now it is and every record I've made has been honest about how I felt at the time.

RIP: Does it scare you that you may have no choice in the matter, that it might always *have* to be that way?

TR: If it starts to be that way, I'll quit doing it. Eventually, it'll drive me to another avenue.

RIP: Let's say the weight on your mind and shoulders *does* lighten up in a few years and your demeanor leads you to write happier tunes. What if you discover that the few million people worldwide who revel in your misery and bleakness don't give a shit about a happy Trent Reznor. Would it be a shock?

TR: Well I'm sure I wouldn't be happy to discover something like that. But the framework under which Nine Inch Nails is set up now is to express those negative things. So I'm not always angry and I'm not always f?!king depressed, but I wrote a story and this is what it was about. If I change then I won't be able to write music like this and I don't wanna make myself either. I've been accused of this a few times: 'Oh, I have some little formula that seems to work and now I'm just cranking it out.' I heard a journalist say this to me once: 'What do you have to be miserable about, you've got a big record deal, you've got a successful band.' You could tell that this journalist hasn't achieved anything he's ever set out to get, if he had he'd have learnt that achieving your goal isn't everything you dream of, that total life-fulfillment hasn't been achieved. It becomes pointless to defend yourself against things

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like that, because I won't say 'I meant it.' I know I did. As far as *The Downward Spiral* goes, all I know is I made a small-scale, personal, potentially ugly record that was how I felt. All I could hope for is that there are people out there who'll think, *wow, I'm not the only person who thought those things*. The expression of some of those ugly things are things you wouldn't want to tell your mom, your friends even your lover. But it's no public f?!king service either; it's just what I felt.

RIP: More than any other release, *The Downward Spiral* centers on the concept of control, whether it be people dominating each other physically to the use of sex as a control to mental slavery. Was there a specific moment in life that intrigued you as far as control is concerned?

TR: If you think about it, every society is based on control. Which equals power, and that can be, for example, your church telling you to do this and that or the punishment will be going to hell. Or it can be the f?!king PMRC assholes, blatant moral majority, or the pro-life idiots or it can be every relationship you get in, someone wants to control it. I'm aware of it, I'm addressing it, I'm challenging it. I don't know what's made me feel this way, but every time I'm told I can't do this or do it that way, I inherently want to know why. Put it this way, I was a bad employee and it wasn't because I wouldn't work hard, it was because what I was being told was dumb...

RIP: What f?!ked day jobs did you take early on?

TR: I cleaned toilets at a Howard Johnson's hotel for a week, which sucked! And my dad had a small little music store that sold acoustic instruments, violins, mandolins, banjos, that kind of shit, your small-town corner music shop. It was cool, it was interesting. Then I continued that illustrious career when I moved to Cleveland and then went to work at a studio cleaning toilets again!

RIP: Back on the track of *The Downward Spiral*, once again you're lyrically very blunt and abrupt. The sex imagery you bring up is very explicit and raw but not anything many people have never thought about in their lives. Do you think there's a hypocrisy in our society that prevents people from facing up to these things, such as the line 'I want to f?!k you like an animal,' which I'm sure everyone's felt at least once?

TR: But in our society you're meant to suppress that or you're 'unhealthy.' I think to be able to acknowledge that to yourself is a healthy thing. I think if you go to sleep and have a homosexual dream and you're straight, then so the f?!k what? You're not gonna wake up dead, you're not gonna go to hell for that. I mean people should allow themselves to loosen the shackles a little bit and allow themselves to think about things that you're taught aren't so good to think about. That could be on a sexual level, like when you realize, *hmmm, other guys jack-off too...man, I thought I was a freak*. When that revelation takes place it's healthy. The images on MTV, imagine growing up with the imagery, it can't give a healthy outlook. I think America's incredibly f?!ked-up on a sexual level.

RIP: But once again you're not doing this as a psych-service for anyone.

TR: No I don't give a f?!k, I don't know if what I'm saying is good and I don't care. If you wanna say that's how you feel, cool, if you wanna say that *isn't* how you feel, well, that's cool too. But I'd hope to evoke some sort of reaction. I am so f?!kin' bored with the music coming out recently and the whole trend towards retro, whether that be 'What does grunge really mean other than 70s rock bands'...' I find some of the sincerity appealing, it helped shave off a few layers of the bullshit that had been put on. But take a Lenny Kravitz record. You hear a record by him and the first time I hear it I think, 'Wow this sounds really well written and it almost sounds like I've heard it before...'

RIP: Then you realize you have.

TR: Yeah. I think he's a good craftsman at what he does, but I hate what he does. But a lot of music today [Reznor doesn't mean Kravitz necessarily] is product, written from a video perspective. And whilst that's interesting, I find it less interesting than good music. When I make a record I approach it on a songwriting level, a mood level, statement level and engineering level, the way it sounds.

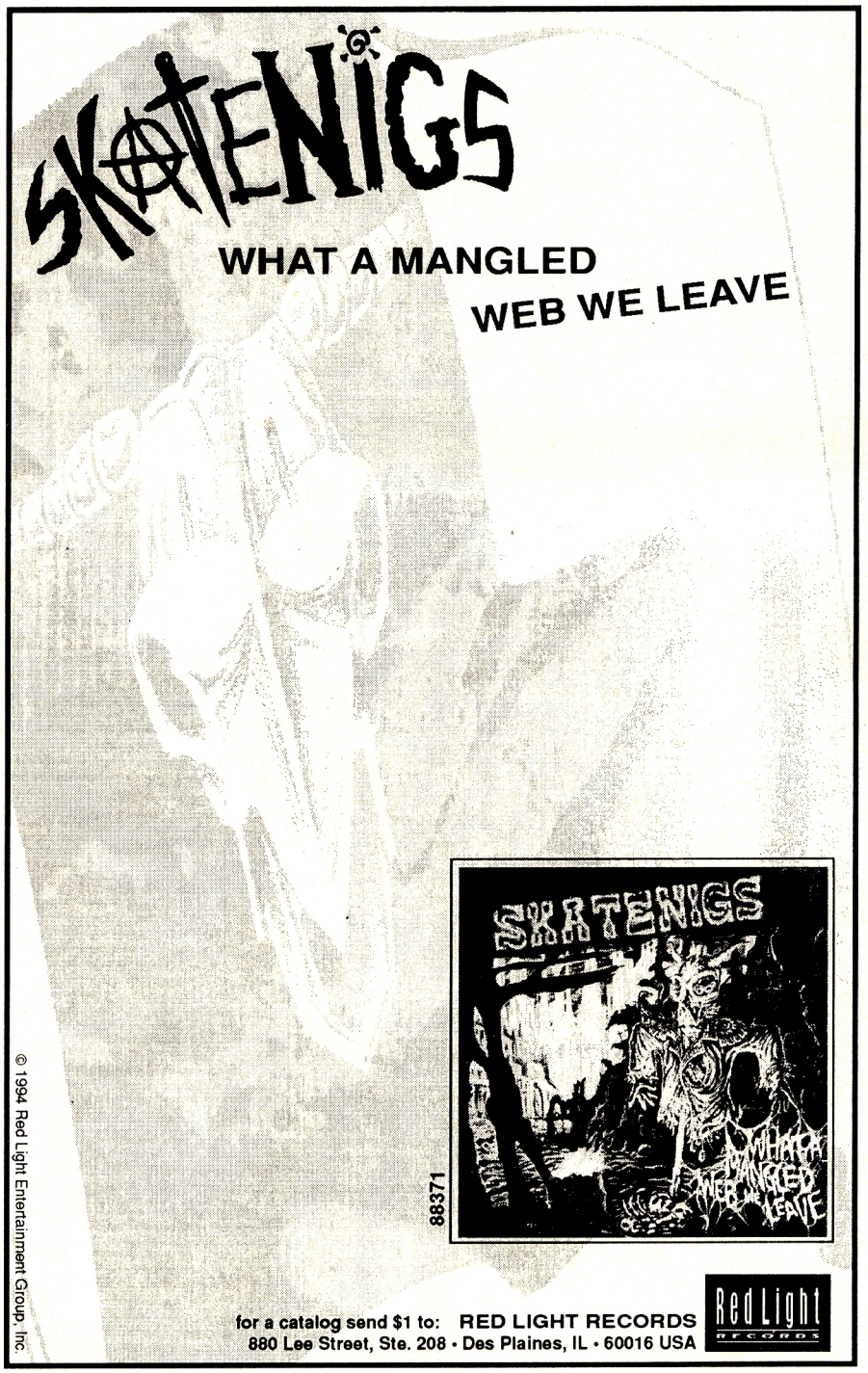
RIP: Is there any raw power in heavy metal that you can identify with?

TR: Pantera. I think Pantera's a great band. I briefly heard the new album, lent it out to my guitar player and never got it back. But *Vulgar Display Of Power* is vocally awesome, anger-amazing and the sense of power and that f?!kin' guitar sound is a new reference point. For that sort of thing, from my perspective, I haven't heard anyone do it better. But labels and categories are a big problem in keeping people away from stuff they'd probably like.

RIP: Is the intellectualizing of Nine Inch Nails, *Pretty Hate Machine*, the EP's, *The Downward Spiral* and ultimately Trent Reznor, amusing or trying?

TR: I guess I'm flattered in the sense that there's something to talk about, that there's a level of intrigue that people maybe have. 'Was it my sugary breakfast cereal,' did that make me hyperactive and set me off as a kid', hahahaha, I mean, I don't f?!king know.

Be glad he doesn't... •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